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FM AMCONSUL CHENNAI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2549
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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUEHRC/DEPT OF AGRICULTURE WASHDC
RUCPDOC/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CHENNAI 000343

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

USDA PASS FAS/OSTA/EPORTER, FAS/OCRA/FERUS/BEAN/RADLER

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EAGR](#) [ECON](#) [SENV](#) [PGOV](#) [EINV](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: DESPITE NATIONAL APPROVAL, BIOTECH EGGPLANT GENERATES
OPPOSITION IN SOUTH INDIA

11. (SBU) Summary: India's Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) approved on October 14, 2009 the use of a biotech eggplant ("brinjal" to most Indians) variety as safe for environmental release. The GEAC has forwarded its recommendation to the Central government for a final determination. The decision has sparked a controversy in South India, however, as farmers, NGOs, and some politicians have lined up in strong opposition, claiming that the biotech eggplant poses risks to humans and the environment. These groups intend to lobby state governments to reject the GEAC's guidance and ultimately ban the use of this product. Much of the debate on this issue is emotional, and opinions on the subject are strongly held.
End Summary.

Fears of toxicity tops list of concerns

12. (U) The Indian firm Mahyco developed the Bt eggplant (brinjal) biotech product at the center of this debate by inserting gene characteristics for the creation of specific proteins from *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt), a common soil bacterium, into an eggplant seed. (In India, Monsanto was the original Bt technology provider to Mahyco, but Bt brinjal development, approval and eventual commercialization was Mahyco's own initiative.) Bt produces a complex protein in the resulting plant that is toxic to fruit- and shoot-boring pests that sometimes destroy as much as seventy percent of an Indian farmer's brinjal crop. According to the decision announced by the GEAC, Bt brinjal is safe and poses no known risk to humans. (Note: Bt corn and other crops have been grown in the U.S. for almost two decades without any known side effects. However, Bt eggplant is not yet approved for planting or human consumption anywhere in the world, including the U.S. End note.)

13. (SBU) Some critics of Bt brinjal allege that its long-term effects on humans remain unknown. Anbumani Ramdoss, a former Union Health Minister and a leading political figure in one of Tamil Nadu's smaller political parties, told us that *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) occurs naturally in the soil, but is not generally consumed by humans. He opined that introducing Bt directly into the brinjal cells will allow its toxin to enter the digestive system, with potentially negative effects. The director of a consumer advocacy group explained similarly that neither long-term toxicity experiments nor tests for carcinogenicity have been carried out by a publicly-funded, credible laboratory.

Concerns about the business model

14. (SBU) Some critics object to the possibility of "big business" seizing control of India's agriculture, a very sensitive political issue here. Opposition groups have expressed concerns that large agribusiness companies will protect their investments in biotech through suppression of seed regeneration or contracts requiring

farmers to buy seed only from them, year after year. This, critics argue, would allow firms like Monsanto to obtain monopolistic control over the eggplant seed market. Some opponents also point out that some countries prohibit the importation of biotech crops, thus reliance on biotech products in India might harm the country's ability to export in the future.

Environmental concerns

15. (SBU) Fear of uncontrollable biotech seed germination and wild variety contamination is another concern. Currently, there are thirty to forty varieties of brinjal grown across Tamil Nadu, each with distinct characteristics and taste. Some critics say the current brinjal diversity would be negatively affected, leaving only a few biotech varieties remaining.

Proponents face an uphill struggle

16. (SBU) The research on Bt brinjal, which indicates that it is safe and effective in reducing pesticide use and increasing yields, is available in the public domain. However, proponents are still finding a substantial amount of skepticism among the populace and continued misinformation reported by the media. Even with scientific research readily available, influential opinion leaders, including policy makers, too often form their views from emotional arguments routinely portrayed in the news, or even appear to be uninformed.

17. (SBU) Following the GEAC's announcement, for example, Karnataka's Environment and Ecology Minister told the press he was "not

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interested" in the issue. The state's Agriculture Minister admitted he was "not aware of the technical details" but noted that he gets his information through the media. The Health Minister also told the press that he was "not aware of specifics" but revealed that he had learned through the media that "Bt brinjal was not safe."

18. (SBU) Politicians in Kerala are particularly opposed to biotech products. The state's Agriculture Minister told the audience at a "Brinjal Festival" in Trivandrum hosted by anti-biotech NGOs that he would take the lead in encouraging his counterparts in other states to oppose biotech crops (often referred to in India as "GM" or "genetically modified" crops). He explained that his ultimate aim was for Kerala to take the lead in making India a "GM-free country."

Comment

19. (SBU) State governments still need to approve Bt brinjal seeds before they can be marketed in South India. Based on the initial reaction to the GEAC's decision, Bt brinjal has few supporters willing to publicly advocate for its introduction in the South. The public is generally skeptical of the government's ability to properly evaluate and regulate most things. The GEAC's decision has done little to address concerns about the alleged risks continually drummed into public consciousness by biotech critics. South India's public has heard little of the potential benefits of biotech products, but many people are aware of the criticisms and allegations against them. As long as this remains the case, it will be difficult for state policy makers to approve -- and even harder for the public to accept -- biotech food products, including Bt brinjal. End Comment.

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